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ABSTRACT

In this paper, it is noted that there are three reasons for studying the black gifted child. First, black destiny has in part been shaped by talented blacks--for example, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Second, the black gifted are a minority within a minority. The gifted black female, subject to sexism, is even more of a minority. Third, whether or not programs for the gifted should exist is not at question: they do exist and black children should participate fully in these programs. The black gifted child presents different problems from the white gifted child in terms of the following: (1) identification of the gifted and mislabeling; (2) the social milieu of the gifted, particularly family and peers; and (3) programs and possibilities for facilitating the identification and development of the black gifted. A short review of programs for the gifted, a list of Passow's five recommended steps for developing programs for the culturally different gifted, a short bibliography on the minority gifted, and a list of sources for information concerning the gifted and talented are included. (Author/PMR)

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THE GIFTED BLACK CHILD

PROBLEMS AND PROMISE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED

BY

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AT THE CONFERENCE ON

LIVING AND WORKING WITH THE GIFTED BLACK CHILD

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The Gifted Black Child: Problems & Promise

Let me begin by indicating why a conference was organized on this topic. Education is a vast field and the problems are many. Indeed, if one reads the journals in the field and weekly publications such as The Chronicle of Higher Education it seems that hardly a day passes that there isn't a conference somewhere on one or more of the issues confronting the profession today.

In terms of the "why" of this conference topic there were basically three reasons for focusing on the gifted black child.

First, as Martinson indicated not only does the waste of the gifted affect the gifted person, it also directly affects society. "It is", he stated "via the gifted that altruistic means for providing solutions to our growing social ills will be formulated."[1] The historian Arnold Toynbee indicated that "To give a fair chance to potential creativity is a matter of life and death for any society."[2]

It is particularly important that blacks not permit the waste of their gifted. The importance of these people to black fortunes can be illustrated by looking at two of the major figures in the black movement of the 1960's, figures who were, in some respects, at opposite ends of the political spectrum -- but who held in common, unusual ability -- Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

King, son of a prominent minister from a solid black middle class background, graduated from high school at age 15 and entered Morehouse College of Atlanta University, finishing at age 19. He at first had doubts about the

"intellectual respectability" of the ministerial calling in the modern world, but eventually under the influence of Benjamin Mays, President of Atlanta, elected the church rather than law or medicine. Entering first Crozer seminary and then the doctoral program at Boston University, he finished his degree work quickly. He was by all accounts an early and avid reader and a supremely capable student receiving a number of scholarship offers after finishing Morehouse. His performance from an early age was such as to fit the description that educators offer today for the gifted child.[3]

At the other end of the black social class spectrum was Malcolm Little, son of a follower of Marcus Garvey who was probably murdered for being "uppity." In grade school Malcolm indicated an interest in becoming a lawyer only to be told by his teacher that the highest a little black boy such as he should strive to become was to be a carpenter. The story of Malcolm Little, ne: Malcolm X is too well known to need recounting. He became first a highly successful criminal - dealing in dope, women, and robbery -- and then the prime source of the surge to public attention of the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, the Black Muslims. His views provided the philosophy for a generation of young blacks.[4] Indeed, it is possible to say that without Malcolm X the struggle on the part of many young blacks to gain a more coherent and positive sense of black self would have been much more difficult, if not altogether impossible.

The black gifted clearly have played a key role in shaping black fate and it is in the interest of all blacks to see that the gifts of the black gifted do not wither and die or become twisted and gnarled.

As Torrance indicated, "The creative energies of gifted children need to be activated and guided early or else they can be lost - or prove dangerous."[5]

Second, the black gifted are, as Major Thomas, Director of the Equal Opportunity Program at the State University of New York, in earlier discussions of the topic, a minority within a minority. The white gifted are anything from a 2% to a 20% minority depending on how gifted is defined and even they have problems. Some observers have noted that evidence of intellectual or artistic gifts may evoke such epithets as "egghead", "long-haired kid" or "brain" and that wise-cracks directed at the gifted child may be heard in wealthy suburban communities as well as in the working class or rural areas. Margaret Mead has indicated that sometimes "It becomes fashionable not to get better grades than the others, not to move up too fast. These pressures for keeping on all fours with one's classmates, neighbors, (and) business associates...are strong in American life...especially in the case of the child who shows intellectual or artisitc gifts."

The problems of the black gifted are compounded. Peer pressures not to perform at a high level may be very strong, particularly insofar as the intellectual accomplishments of the gifted black child are expressed in what the black peer group might define as a "white" curriculum, leading to accusations that the achieving black is trying to be or act white.

In all probability the problems of the gifted black female are compounded further still by sexism. The literature of the women's movement has complained, and rightly so, about the pressures women have often felt to hide their intelligence for fear of upsetting males, thereby being rejected by them as "unfeminine" or "too pushy" or "abrasive". The gifted black female's problems then overlap with but are not wholly identical to those of the gifted male black.

The second reason then for focusing a workshop on this topic is that we are dealing with a minority within a minority. There is an enormous literature on giftedness, but only a very small percentage of it focuses on the gifted black child and only a handful of scholars have done work on the topic. This is then a minority within a minority, a population which has been subject to neglect, both benign and malign.

Third, although I have heard some blacks question whether there should be special attention given to the gifted black child, I am not sympathetic to the notion that there should not be. From the black perspective the matter can, in my view, be stated in a very simple and straightforward manner: Programs for the gifted will, in any event, exist, and public monies are in fact going to be spent on them. It is idle therefore to question whether such programs should exist. They are going to be there. The responsibility of black parents and the black community in general is to see that black children participate fully in these programs.

To do otherwise is to neglect the interest of a number of black children. One commentator has observed that "Democracy attempts to provide for the maximum development of each individual. It would seem, therefore that the neglect of the gifted, the failure to give the gifted special attention is the undemocratic policy."

Dunn states that "...recent surveys indicate that there may be a trend toward increasing services and programs for the gifted."[6] Given this likelihood it would seem then that the practical choices for blacks are either to pay attention to the black gifted or see them miss out on programs which are going to exist anyway and which black tax dollars are helping pay for. As John Kennedy said, speaking of more general cultural attitudes, "If you scoff at intellectuals, harass scientists,

and reward only athletic achievement, then the future is dark indeed."[7]

In summary, there are three reasons for focusing on this topic: first, the talented black has been a major force in shaping black destiny; second, they are a neglected minority; and third, for blacks to fail to pay close attention to this group is to sacrifice them while at the same time paying for programs that nurture the gifted white.

Let us turn now to the question of whether the black gifted present different problems than the white gifted, focusing on a) the problem of identification, b) the social milieu of the black gifted, particularly family and peers, and c) programs and possibilities in terms of facilitating their identification and development.

Identification

There is a large literature on the problems of identifying the gifted and, in general, a variety of techniques are used. The problem in terms of the black gifted is that those traits which may, in the white child be viewed by teachers as signs of being gifted, for black children may be taken as indications of behavioral problems or possibly even of retardation.

I am talking about the phenomenon of labelling and saying that teachers may be much more likely, holding constant behavior, to place negative labels on black children than they are on white.

I start with the assumption that gifted children will, in certain ways, behave differently in the classroom than other children and that it is a crucial matter for black children as to how teachers interpret that difference.

Rice has indicated that, "In a congenial educational setting, gifted children are likely to be curious, interested in words and ideas, to manifest a

keen sense of humor, display the ability to make logical connections, demonstrate the ability to do original research, and to display considerable drive to accomplish goals."[8]

However,

"They may, at times display characteristics that teachers deem to be undesirable. They are particularly prone to displease teachers when they are placed in a setting calling for repetitious superficial activities. In such circumstance, the child may become restless, inattentive, disinterested, and unmotivated. He may react more aggressively."[9]

It is a question then ultimately of how the behavior of children is interpreted. Is the curiousity in the classroom of the black child defined as aimlessness? Is his/her sense of humor defined as disrespect for authority? Is their originality defined as strange, deviant, wierd or even autistic behavior?

I would advance the hypothesis that not many teachers are likely to immediately entertain the notion that the problem black child is a problem because he or she is bright. Rather they are more likely to invoke the hypothesis that the child has a personality disorder, or comes from a "culturally impoverished" house, or is simply stuipid.

It has not been the predisposition of American educators to link the words "gifted" and "black". Father the reflex linkages with the words "black child" have been "educationally disadvantaged", "culturally deprived", and "retarded". It is even possible that most of the literature on gifted blacks has been done by black educators. In other words, of all of the thousands of white educators this country has seen since, say, the turn of the century, and of all of the thousands of articles and books written by them. few have dealt with the gifted black minority child.

In other words, there is simply not a mind-set for educators which leads easily to invoking the hypothesis of giftedness for blacks for behavior which would yield that hypothesis for a white child.

As was indicated earlier, the gifted in general may suffer; the phenomenon is only compounded for the black gifted. It may be a question however of that kind of student not only being mislabeled, but of being exposed to school experiences which actually promote intellectual deterioration. This process can be illustrated by reference to an editorial in the journal The Gifted Child Quarterly dealing with a white youngster.

"A Kindergarten child was brought to our offices for evaluation...the school...was urging the mother and father to see the family pediatrician and request that some tranquilizing medication be prescribed for little Julie. Further it was the school's opinion that the child might benefit from being placed in classes for boys and girls with learning disabilities to prevent the on-set of further problems."

"Upon examination the child was found to have an I.Q. of 130 and the vocabulary of a 10 year old."

The author of the editorial then goes on to indicate that, "Preschool children we have followed whose schools treated them with rejection have repeatedly lost (intellectually). In one case the drop was from 150 to 95."[10]

A number of studies have indicated that the longer black children stay in school the lower the scores on measures of ability. The black psychologist S. O. Roberts, in a longitudinal study using a modified form of the Stanford-Binet test found declines over a 5 year period of 10 points. Lower class black boys, those most likely to find an unpleasant ambiance in the school, dropped the most precip-

itously, an average of 15 points. On the average, in 5 years the children in the study lost about 1 year of measured mental functioning.[11]

Atkinson in a study of black children labelled retarded found that they differed from comparably retarded white children in that their measured verbal I.Q. was greater than their performance I.Q.[12] This leads to intriguing speculation as to whether a complex of negative experiences had depressed the performance level of these black children below the level that other measures suggested it should have been.

Even where negative experiences do not actually generate a deterioration in intellectual proficiency, they may promote a loss of interest in formal education. Keating in a report on a special program in Maryland for mathematically gifted children indicated that "...generally the trend is clear, gifted 7th and 8th grade students who were advanced enough to get high scores on...college level tests reported less 'liking for school'...they reported a disillusionment with school in particular and academic pursuits in general. The freedom and frustration generated by their school situation was expressed in different ways by different students, as might be expected, but it was frequently present."[13]

Keating recognized that some might argue that these students were maladjusted to begin with, but the California Personality Inventory taken by the students tended to show that this was not the case and that the maladjustment was "situational".[14]

The point is then that the problems of the gifted black child represent in more intense form the problems the gifted child may face in any event in many school systems: mislabelling, an actual deterioration of performance, or a deep estrangement from schools.

PEER PRESSURES

I want to now say a few words about peer pressures before finishing with a discussion of new strategies for identifying the gifted black child and new types of supportive programs.

Peer pressure is a reality in any school. In other words, irrespective of the level of expectations or standards of performance established by teachers there are peer pressures on students to perform at a level and in ways that the students themselves determine is appropriate. In general students whose performance significantly exceeds the student-determined norm runs the risk of ridicule, ostracism or, occasionally, manhandling.

Again, for the gifted black student peer pressures may have a more agonizing dimension than for gifted whites.

First, given the lower average level of performance of black students, the gap between the level at which gifted black students could perform and the level to which peers constrain them may be greater than the gap faced by the gifted white student as a result of pressure from white peers.

This is compounded by the fact that gifted black students may be seen as attempting to conform to a curriculum which is defined as "white and may, therefore, be accused of "Toming".

Let us now turn to the question of identification and programs in terms of some of the considerations that I have raised thus far with regard to problems of labelling.

In general, the techniques used to identify the gifted involve the use of 1) individual intelligence tests, 2) teacher observations, 3) previously demonstrated accomplishments, 4) group achievement tests, 5) creativity tests, 6) group intelligence tests.

Obviously, many of these have pitfalls in terms of the gifted minority child. Pegnato and Birch a number of years ago indicated that research demonstrated teachers failing to recognize a substantial number of children who were later identified as gifted.[15] Gallagher stated that teachers' observations were particularly likely to overlook "gifted under-achievers, non-motivated gifted students, and gifted students who exhibited behavior problems."[16] E. Paul Torrance, the originator of the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking echoed this. "Efforts to identify gifted children among disadvantaged and minority groups have been seriously handicapped by the lack of tests and screening procedures that will give such children a fair chance to perform in a gifted manner."[17]

In recent years a number of educators have begun to address themselves to this problem and, apparently, progress has been made in terms of developing instruments less contaminated by cultural and class bias.

Torrance has indicated that when the Test of Creative Thinking was in the early stages of formulation, effort was made to include only things that were common to all children or strange to all children. Tin cans and cardboard boxes, for example, were chosen as common objects for the Unusual Uses Tasks on the assumption that all children would be familiar with their conventional uses.[18]

There have been a number of attempts to determine the applicability of the Torrance Test across race and social class lines. Both the figural and verbal forms of the test were given to 600 children in Wisconsin in the 4th, 7th, and 12th grades. "...no statistically significant differences between black and white children (were found) on any of the measures."[19]

In Florida, Covington found no differences by race between 109 white boys 15 to 18 having an average I.Q. of 117 and 74 blacks with an average I.Q. of 100.[20]

Torrance himself after administering the verbal and figural batteries to the total population of a segregated black rural Georgia elementary school indicated, "when compared with children in an elementary school in a relatively advantaged Minneapolis suburb the black children tended to excel their white advantaged counterparts on measures of figural fluency, flexibility and originality."[21]

The Torrance Test has been shown, according to educators, to predict adult creative achievement among advantaged groups and should, therefore have the same potential for blacks and other minorities. Whether it does so depends, of course, on some of the factors cited earlier, -- labelling, peer pressures and the like. But as Torrance has indicated "Since disadvantaged children rarely have the opportunity to develop their abilities, my guess is that without some rather powerful intervention the answer (to the question of those minority children identified as creative would show adult achievement would be "no". With such intervention however we have at least one excellent demonstration that the answer could be "yes".[22]

Other educators have also been active in terms of attempting to develop more sophisticated instruments. Brunch has the abbreviated Stanford Binet for disadvantaged black children[23] and Renzulli and Hartman have designed the Sub-Cultural Indices of Academic Potential which asks students how they feel about themselves and how they would react to everyday situations, resulting in a profile of student preferences and learning styles.[24] Other scholars are looking at non-intellectual measures that nevertheless predict academic success, Lewis, et al found that scores on selective scales of the Strong Vocational Interest Blank significantly differentiated engineering students who dropped out from those who did not.[25]

Cameron has indicated that there is increasing evidence that "personality tests such as the California Personality Inventory have predictive validity for academic performance in mathematics, creative writing and architectural designing and significantly predict those college students who later become drop outs."[26]

The point is that there are new tests and new approaches and that it is incumbant on both teachers and parents to be aware of them and to explore their use, and where appropriate to bring them into their own schools.

In addition to new diagnostic approaches there are a few programs here and there.

Educational programs for the culturally different gifted have been initiated in several places. Through Project CLUE (Cooperative Leadership for Urban Education) Tennessee's four major school systems -- Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville - have involved urban students in learning in a program seeking to convert student apathy or self-destructive behavior into enthusiasm and responsible accomplishment.

At the University of Georgia, Torrance and his graduating students (many of them teachers in public schools) have striven each summer since 1967 in creativity workshops to identify and develop creative talent among the disadvantaged. These workshops have been conducted in a disadvantaged Black neighborhood in Clarke County, Georgia and have involved 80 to 100 children ranging from 6 to 12 years of age.

Passow discussed some of the steps necessary for developing programs for the culturally different gifted. The appropriateness of these measures varies, of course, from school to school and situation to situation. They involve:

1. Planning and conducting staff inservice training to alter expectations about the probability of talent being found among the culturally different.

2. Developing appropriate guidance and other ancillary services to help the gifted culturally different with affective matters such as peer and family attitudes toward the gifted child's "being different".

3.(If the school is an inner city school) Taking advantage of the rich and varied resources for learning in many urban centers.

4. Where appropriate and possible, the development of opportunities for these students to teach other students. Clearly, this can be very exciting and rewarding.

5. The development of opportunities for work and study for the talented in settings and involving nontraditional personnel. (For example, intensive on-sight work at IBM for those who can be brought up to it.)

CONCLUSIONS

These have been some of the issues attending the question of the gifted black child: labelling, peer pressures, curricula, new diagnostic strategies and new programs.

Inevitably there are issues I have not touched on but which I assume will come up in the course of the afternoon. I have not, for example, defined "gifted". This is because any definition carries program implications. There is a question, it seems to me, of whether one can speak of giftedness in a global sense, i.e. of a "gifted person", or whether it is more appropriate to speak of particular talents or attributes which a person has and which should be nurtured. The difference is one of speaking of a "gifted person" on the one hand, or of a "person who is gifted in a particular thing", on the other. These differing conceptions convey different

program implications. A conception of a gifted person implies programs largely or completely separate from those of the "non-gifted", while a conception of a person who is gifted along a given dimension suggests only special classes in one topic or another for a student who otherwise would remain in regular classes. Modern factor-analytic research on human abilities suggests that even this simplifies the matter, but we will come back to it in the course of later panel discussions.

Neither have I talked about the different situations in which gifted black children and parents find themselves. Some are involved in inner city schools in which the overall educational deterioration is so great that every student is being victimized. No one who isn't brain damaged cannot be taught to read and write at a level sufficent to function in the society, yet in many schools that is not occurring. In such schools everyone is being lost, the average and the bright, and the first task is to generate minimally adequate standards for all.

The black gifted however, presents special problems and I have attempted in this talk to identify some of those problems and suggest approaches to solutions.

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